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ABSTRACT

The opportunity to grow and socialize in a supportive environment, a process taken for granted by heterosexual adolescents, continues to elude the gay and lesbian adolescent population, especially within the educational community. A goal of education should be to provide support for gay and lesbian teenagers before self-defeating behavior patterns become entrenched. Through youth support groups, curricula integrated with gay and lesbian issues, and varied activities designed to confront homophobia, counselors and educators can begin to move toward meaningful services for this population. Certainly this will not happen as long as adults and society continue to instill anger, fear, dislike, and hatred of gay men and lesbians into the minds of children. Counselors and educators have a responsibility to move past negative stereotypes and personal homophobia to provide gay and lesbian students a deserved alternative to the rhetoric of prejudice and false beliefs attached to the homosexual lifestyle. This can happen if professional counselors and educators take advantage of opportunities which allow for exploration of their own homophobia and individual biases in regard to differences, while developing the skills necessary to sensitively meet the needs of minority and stigmatized populations. In questioning individual attitudes, beliefs, and values, one fulfills a responsibility to open youth to the world with truth, integrity, and respect for all differences. (ABL)

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Educated to Be Invisible:
The Gay and Lesbian Adolescent

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Abstract

A review of current literature reveals that gay and lesbian youth comprise approximately 10% of our student population. This "invisible" population is subject to suicide attempts, substance abuse, and other behavioral disorders. This paper identifies the developmental needs of this population and suggests facilitative ways to create meaningful services and a safe, supportive educational climate for the gay and lesbian youth in our schools.

Educated to Be Invisible:

The Gay and Lesbian Adolescent

In 1969, a group of gay men refused to allow themselves to be physically and mentally harassed because of their sexual orientation. The resultant Stonewall Riots, in New York City, marked the beginning of the gay liberation movement (Rudolph, 1988). Public consciousness regarding homosexual oppression was raised, and in 1973 the American Psychiatric Association issued a statement depathologizing homosexuality (American Psychiatric Association, 1974). This statement has had, and continues to have, a powerful impact on individuals working within the helping professions.

While mental health professionals have worked to create positive and meaningful programs for the gay and lesbian population, educational systems have been considerably less eager to recognize and respond to the needs of this minority group (Benvenuti, 1986; Powell, 1987; Rofes, 1989). Public schools have continued to treat homosexuality as a forbidden subject, and most educational systems have been content to adopt the popular stance that homosexual behavior is a "phase," and that exploring one's sexuality through same-sex

sexual activities is not uncommon as students pass through adolescence and into adulthood (Glasser, 1977; Remafedi, 1987). Within this framework, educators can continue to refute and deny the existence of the gay and lesbian adolescent population, and thus maintain the presumption that all adolescents will eventually conform to societal norms and identify with a heterosexual lifestyle. Somehow, this outdated viewpoint has fostered a mind-set which assumes that gay and lesbian adolescents either do not exist, or will be able to effectively "find their way" within a heterosexual model that does little to combat the social taboo of homosexuality (Martin, 1982; Schneider & Tremble, 1986; Troiden, 1979).

It is currently estimated that "nearly 3 million of our country's 29 million adolescents are gay" (Herdt, 1989, p. 2). Given this estimate, one realizes that approximately 10% of our student population is gay or lesbian and, as such, experiences unique and significant challenges in their attempt to developmentally integrate many of the essential biological, cognitive, psychological, and social changes that occur during adolescence (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin,

& Gebhard, 1968). Gay and lesbian adolescents continue to be socialized to conceal their identities--educated to be invisible within the school community and the community at large (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Krysiak, 1987; Martin, 1982; Powell, 1987).

What helping professionals are beginning to realize is that these "invisible" students are becoming more visible each day through increased numbers of referrals to school counselors, school social workers, substance abuse personnel, and varied support staff. Individual reasons for these referrals are "diverse, but among the most common concerns are efforts to clarify or change sexual orientation; family conflict regarding sexuality; anxiety; attempted suicide; grief over the dissolution of a first relationship; substance abuse; and other disorders of conduct" (Coleman & Remafedi, 1989, p. 36).

This paper will attempt to synthesize some of the research regarding the major issues confronting gay and lesbian adolescents and to identify those psychosocial issues unique to this population. This synthesis will then be followed by a brief outline of critical steps that school counselors can implement to create a safe place for gay and lesbian students to explore their

needs and move toward the resolution of conflicts related to individual developmental tasks.

Review of Literature

Definitions of Key Terms

Many definitions for the term homosexual have been offered. For the purpose of this discussion, a simple definition created by Schneider and Tremble (1986) will be used: "Homosexuals are people who, at the present time, prefer physical and emotional relationships with people of the same sex" (p. 73). It is important to note that this simple definition encompasses more than just the behavioral expression of homosexuality, and equally emphasizes the ability of the individual to "make significant emotional investments in same-sex relationships" (Schneider & Tremble, 1986, p. 73).

Adolescence can be defined as a time when the development and maturation of psychological and social processes result in the creation of an autonomous and independently capable human being (Brunstetter, 1985). Developmental tasks during this time in the life cycle often fall into "four broad categories: identity, connectedness, power, and hope/joy" (Selverstone, 1989, p. 1).

Developmental Directions

Accomplishment of the four developmental tasks aids the teenager/adolescent in moving away from the dependence of childhood and toward the autonomy of adulthood (Erikson, 1963). Peer group interactions become paramount at this junction as adolescents challenge childhood values and begin to differentiate from and within family systems (Cates, 1987; Tartagni, 1978). Exploring one's sexuality continues to be a critical area through which adolescents attempt to define the parameters around and elements within their own identity, as well as a vehicle to develop connectedness (intimacy) with others (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Reiter, 1989; Selverstone, 1989). Successful resolution of these two tasks validates the self and moves the adolescent toward a sense of power (control in one's life), joy (positiveness around one's identity), and hope (optimism in regard to the future) (Selverstone, 1989).

Typically, progression through these stages involves considerable tentative movement, struggle, and confusion (Coleman & Remafedi, 1989; Erikson, 1963). While there is little evidence that homosexual and heterosexual adolescents progress through general

biological and cognitive changes differently (Gonsiorek, 1987), it is clear that psychological and social development for the gay- or lesbian-oriented adolescent involves issues uniquely different from those experienced by the heterosexually-oriented adolescent (Cates, 1987; Martin & Hetrick, 1988).

Psychosocial Challenges

In searching for a sense of self, the homosexual adolescent is met with the realization that he or she is a member of a stigmatized minority group (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). "Sexual desire, a central aspect of the adolescent's developing self becomes for the homosexual adolescent a threat to everything toward which he or she has been socialized" (Martin & Hetrick, 1988, p. 168). This realization, and the accompanying fear of exposure, leads to a process of deception which "distorts almost all relationships the adolescent may attempt to develop or maintain and creates an increasing sense of isolation" (Martin, 1982, p. 59). Within this isolation, the gay or lesbian teenager often withdraws from typical adolescent social experiences (Schneider & Tremble, 1986), and thus does not only not develop an opportunity to discover what it means to be homosexual (cognitive isolation), but does

not have a chance to develop a meaningful social identity (Goffman, 1963).

In order to maintain this isolating behavior, the gay or lesbian adolescent develops a variety of coping strategies that become increasingly detrimental to the development of positive self-image and self-esteem (Coleman & Remafedi, 1989; Martin, 1982; Rofes, 1989). The cognitively isolated adolescent, finding himself or herself with little or no access to information which portrays the homosexual in a positive light, begins to adhere to society's stereotypic negative views of the homosexual and thus sees himself/herself reflected in that negative image (Cates, 1987; Greenberg, 1976). Gonsiorek (1988) reports that continual exposure to antihomosexual bias leads to an internalization of society's homophobia, and resulting "symptoms may range from a tendency toward self-doubt in the face of prejudice to unmistakable, overt self-hatred" (p. 117).

The socially isolated gay or lesbian adolescent becomes extremely creative in order to avoid discovery. Often his or her efforts at concealment include subtle, covert actions such as becoming increasingly involved in academics or hobbies in order to decrease interpersonal contacts or developing rigid unrealistic

expectations of himself or herself and others, while periodically abandoning personal, educational, or career goals (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Warren, 1980). The more overt and destructive behaviors include heterosexual promiscuity, truancy, attempts at suicide, substance abuse, and prostitution (Martin, 1982; Remafedi, 1988; Saghir & Robins, 1973). Both the covert and overt forms of coping behaviors continue to reinforce for gay or lesbian adolescents the message that their lives are based on a lie, and continue to promote an increasing sense of isolation and desperation as they struggle to create a vision of their future (Martin & Hetrick, 1988).

Perhaps the most powerful impact from the desperate attempt to hide comes from the forced emotional isolation the gay or lesbian teen experiences. It is here that the gay or lesbian adolescent learns to separate from his or her feelings (Tartagni, 1978; Troiden, 1979), and thus begins the internal erosion of self-worth and confidence which ultimately leads to a sense of inferiority, disregard for personal self, and loss of identity (Benvenuti, 1986; Hetrick & Martin, 1987). Gonsiorek (1988) reports that "the net effect of this escalating

emotional blockade is that some adolescents reach adulthood as strangers to their own inner emotional life and have developed habits of constricting any strong feelings" (p. 118). Martin and Hetrick (1988) cite clinical depression and high attempted suicide rates (21% before the age of 20 in their gay/lesbian client population) as representative symptoms of the negative results of these cognitive, social, and emotionally isolating behaviors.

Fueled by the ever-present fear of discovery and a growing negative self-view, gay and lesbian adolescents continue to defend against the confusion, conflict, and uncertainty of same-sex erotic feelings by enlisting an elaborate system of denial (Coleman, 1982). This denial not only complicates the first stage in the coming-out process, referred to as pre-coming out (Schneider & Tremble, 1985), but continues to permeate, and at times stall, the tasks involved in the remaining coming-out stages (Gonsiorek, 1988).

Process of Coming Out

Adolescents in the pre-coming-out stage often cannot verbalize their confusion and conflict, yet may "act out" their struggle (Schneider & Tremble, 1985). Schneider & Tremble (1985) list the following behaviors

as signals that an adolescent may be experiencing confusion in regard to his or her sexual orientation:

1. Clothing, mannerisms, or affections may indicate that the youngster is attempting to conform to the stereotype of the gay man or woman.
2. Heterosexual promiscuity may be a desperate attempt by the gay adolescent to affirm a heterosexual orientation. For straight youth, it may serve to ward off fears that they might be gay.
3. Unusually strong interest in talking about sexuality, especially when questions or comments reflect considerable misunderstanding, indicates problems in this area.
4. References to the homosexual experiences of other people, or to something that happened years ago, frequently arise when the adolescent is testing the waters to determine whether the counselor is a reliable, safe person in whom to confide.
5. Concerns may be raised by a third party, such as the youngster's parents or teachers. These concerns are typically not in relation to overt sexual behavior. More often they concern an inexplicable growing social distance. (p. 78)

Resolution of the developmental tasks during the pre-coming-out stage comes for gay or lesbian adolescents as they acknowledge same-sex feelings and interests to themselves (Coleman, 1982). This acknowledgment allows gay or lesbian adolescents to begin the developmental tasks of the second stage--coming out.

The coming-out process, a declaration of one's sexual orientation, typically

> involves at least five interrelated sub-processes, two of which are psychological and three of which are primarily behavioral: (a) developing an awareness of homosexual feelings; (b) developing a positive evaluation of homosexuality; (c) developing intimate same-sex romantic/erotic relationships; (d) developing social ties with gay peers and the gay community; and (e) self-disclosure. (Schneider & Tremble, 1985, p. 76)

This process is often slow and painful, marked with the loss and rebuilding that are inevitable as one strives to develop an integrated gay-positive self (Gumaer, 1987; Troiden, 1979).

During the coming-out stage, individuals cease fighting with themselves, begin to accept being

different and are less vulnerable to societal pressures to conform (Gumaer, 1987). While they may not identify themselves as gay or lesbian, the internal realization of same-sex interests and feelings begins a period of reconciliation around their sexuality (Gumaer, 1987). Self-admission usually leads to the next developmental task, that of sharing this information with another (Coleman, 1982). Acceptance or rejection of this self-disclosure is critical, for even the most subtle displays of homophobia can activate the denial system, often postponing and complicating the whole coming-out process (Coleman, 1982; Gumaer, 1987; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Martin, 1982; Martin & Hetrick, 1988). It is not uncommon for the individual to return to the pre-coming-out stage if his or her shared awareness is met with negativity.

Should the adolescent find an environment sympathetic to and supportive of his or her struggle, he or she may find the courage to continue the developmental tasks of the remaining stages within the coming-out process (Schneider & Tremble, 1986). While none of the stages in the coming-out process are discrete, and movement within and between these stages is often tentative and tremulous, it is generally

accepted that successful completion of the earlier stages of coming out will create movement toward the universalization and connectedness found in the later stages of the coming-out process (Gonsiorek, 1988; Gumaer, 1987; Troiden, 1979). This, in turn, creates movement away from the desperate "closeted" isolation which quietly beckons as the only possible alternative (Robertson, 1981). It is perhaps the selection of this isolating behavior that continues to reflect the invisibility of the gay and lesbian adolescent population in our educational systems. In turn, it is this invisibility that continues to contribute to the response of silence from school counseling personnel (Benvenuti, 1986).

Implications for Counselors

The coming-out process is just that: a process or series of changes over time. Benvenuti (1986) cites two variables as highly correlated with the development of self-esteem and a positive integrated identity as a gay or lesbian individual: "first, their openness about their sexual orientation, and second, their feelings of alienation from mainstream society" (p. 10).

Since the school counselor may often be the first person within the educational community with whom the

gay or lesbian adolescent chooses to disclose, it becomes imperative that school counselors become aware of and begin working toward resolution of their own homophobic biases (Glenn & Russell, 1986; Norton, 1982; Tartagni, 1978; Thompson & Fishburn, 1977). This can be accomplished through education around the needs of the gay and lesbian population and by maintaining a realization of the critical elements within the early pre-coming-out/coming-out stages. Furthermore, the counselor should acknowledge the importance of the role the coming-out process takes for the gay or lesbian adolescent as he or she transitions toward adulthood (Gonsiorek, 1988; Norton, 1982; Powell, 1987).

Rofes (1989) outlines several points of change necessary if schools are going to meet the needs of the gay and lesbian student population, including:

> focusing on the needs of young people rather than on the demands of parents or the larger community . . . . issues of sexuality must move from the taboo into a public forum . . . . teachers will need to be comfortable with gay and lesbian issues . . . . school curricula will need to be integrated to include the historical contributions of gay men and lesbians . . . . and, educators

> must abandon the concept that by discussing homosexuality in a positive way, they will cause young people to grow up to be gay or lesbian. (pp. 451-452)

Implementing the key elements of this plan would work to lessen the "alienation from mainstream society" referred to by Benvenuti (1986); yet, given the fact that there are few gay rights laws at the federal or state levels, and that minor students are given minimal legal status, implementation of Rofes' (1987) "points of change" will take vision and courage on the part of the school counselor.

The school counselor needs to become an advocate for the gay and lesbian population by educating students, school staff, parents, and community members. This education should include dispelling myths about homosexuals, professionally demonstrating acceptance and support for alternative lifestyles, and influencing curriculum decisions to include gay and lesbian information (Benvenuti, 1986; Rofes, 1989; Wolf, 1989).

Within the immediate program offerings, the school counselor can continue to implement a guidance curriculum that enhances self-esteem, celebrates differences, develops decision-making, and promotes a

sense of self (Benvenuti, 1986; Tartagni, 1978). School counselors can support their curriculum offerings by enlisting a variety of appropriate outside referral sources and by becoming familiar with resources within the gay and lesbian community. This plan will serve the gay and lesbian adolescent on both direct and indirect levels.

Summary

The opportunity to grow and socialize in a supportive environment--a process taken for granted by heterosexual adolescents--continues to elude the gay and lesbian adolescent population, especially within the educational community. A goal of education should be to provide support for gay and lesbian teens before self-defeating behavior patterns become entrenched. Therefore, implementation of recommendations such as those by Rofes (1989), through Youth Support Groups, curricula integrated with gay and lesbian issues, and varied activities designed to confront homophobia, can begin to move counselors and educators toward meaningful services for this population. Certainly this will not happen as long as adults and society continue to instill anger, fear, dislike, and hatred of gay men and lesbians into the minds of children. Youth

take their cues from the important people in their lives and should not need to struggle to make sense of censored information and partial truths.

People in the counseling profession are individuals first, products of society second, and counselors third. As counselors and educators, however, they have a responsibility to move past negative stereotypes and personal homophobia to provide gay and lesbian students a deserved alternative to the rhetoric of prejudice and false beliefs attached to the homosexual lifestyle. This can happen if professional counselors and educators take advantage of opportunities which allow for exploration of their own homophobia and individual biases in regard to differences, while developing the skills necessary to sensitively meet the needs of minority and stigmatized populations.

If nothing else, we have arrived at a place in time where each professional counselor who touches the mind of a child must begin to question individual attitudes, beliefs, and values. In doing this, one fulfills a responsibility to open youth to the world with truth, integrity, and respect for all differences.

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